DEATH: IS IT FATAL?

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Abstract

Death is a common occurrence in the world of today and impacts upon families in a variety of ways, depending upon a range of circumstances. This paper examines the impact that a sudden, unexpected death of the founder of a family business had on both the business and the family. The basis for the research is a single case study of a family business operating in regional Victoria. At the time of the death of the family founder (from a fatal motorcycle accident) his adult children had not been prepared to take over the company. The paper examines if the death of the founder proved fatal to the family business.

Introduction

Davis (1968, p.402) claims that "[m]en die, but organizations generally continue to exist beyond the life of their leaders." While this may be true for large, publicly listed organizations that have been in existence for some time, it may not be the case for family businesses or early startup ventures. The very nature of family business is such that there are often direct links between families and their businesses with the interests of both families and businesses intersecting (Habbershon and Williams, 1999; Habbershon, Williams and MacMillan, 2003: Stafford et al 1999; Danes, et al 2008). This is one area of differentiation between family businesses and non family businesses. Thus one might expect that when the founder of a family business dies there is the possibility the impact of their death could be fatal for the family business.

The objective of this paper is to investigate the impact on a family business of the sudden, unexpected death of the family firm founder and how this event impacted upon the family business. Was the death of the founder fatal to the business? There has been little, if any, research on the relationship between the death of founder of a firm and the impact on the family business. Studies by Johnson et al (1985) Worrell et al (1986) that explicitly examined the impact of the death of key executives (including CEO's) on that business, while valuable, did not make it clear if families and family companies were involved.

Boswell (1973) when researching reasons for the failure of small to medium enterprises in England found that the death of the founder actually revived a number of family firms. But there are few studies on the impact of the death of a founder on the fate of their company. As Shepherd (2009) noted this lack of theory and studies can pose a problem when dealing with such a topic as death as the body of research in family business studies is limited. It becomes necessary to make links to, and inferences from, other related research areas (family business, death and the grief effects on individuals and families). When research has examined the performance of family firms, family and family relationships can be an issue (Kellermans and Eddleston 2004; Eddleston and Kellermans 2007), but there is no mention of how a sudden, unexpected, death might impact upon the family business. There is no real discussion of the death of firm founders in the family business literature. There is a case study of a family business where the imminent death of the founder from a fatal illness but this death was not sudden, nor unexpected. The case concentrated on how the failure to provide an appropriate succession process caused personal problems for the families involved and flowed over into the family business (Ibrahim, Soufani, and Lam, 2001).

There is an extensive literature on the impact of grief on individuals and families (see Patterson, 2002, Lavee et al 1987, Kubitz et al 1989, Kissane et al 1996) but this literature is confined to the family emotional impacts and not necessarily specifically to the impact of the death and accompanying effects of grief on the family business.

Theoretical overview

The overlap of families and their family business is one on which there is general agreement and a key point of departure of the difference between a family business and a non family business. (Stafford et al 1999; Habbershon, Williams and MacWilliams, 2003; Niehm et al 2009). Danes et al 2008 assert "[t]he degree of overlap between family and the business will determine how disruptions in one system impact the other…(p.249) and that, during any disruptions the systems can become more permeable. The point Danes et al is making is closely connected to the potential impact sudden unexpected death can have on a family business. If the overlap is significant then it might be expected that such a severe disruption as sudden, unexpected death could well have an impact beyond the immediate family. Shepherd (2009) details a number of reasons as to why a business matters to a family but it should be acknowledged that families can matter to a family business. For example, the debate surrounding 'familiness' and the resource based view of strategy in a family business (Habbershon and Williams, 1999) and the consistent debates between agency and stewardship and how the position a family adopts impacts on a family business (Chrisman et al 2004; Chrisman et al 2007;.Westhead and Howorth (2006). Social capital is also of importance (Pearson et al 2008) and Gomez-Mejia (2007) discusses 'socioemotional wealth'. Succession issues are another area of interest (Brockhaus, 2004; Davis and Haveston 1998; Handler, 1990 and 1994;Ip and Jacobs 2006).

The sudden unexpected loss of a firm founder can have a much greater impact on a family business than might the loss of a CEO or other key executive on a large, publicly listed company where ownership is not concentrated in one or two central individuals and there is a greater spread of both knowledge and social capital. Complicating the issue even further is when the family business is transgenerational. A family business can be said to be transgenerational when there is more than one generation of the founding family actively engaged in the business either in a director role, an executive role, or some other active capacity.

While the loss of a key executive may matter initially it is not likely to be of great significance to the organization and the organization is usually in a position to recover quickly. Johnson (1985) found that the death of the CEO of a company had little overall long term effects. Worrell et al (1986) came to a similar conclusion when examining the unanticipated death of key executives. As Kellermans and Eddleston (2004) point out, not all family/business relationships are conflict free but the extent any conflict can override the emotional pain of the sudden unexpected death of a family member is an unknown variable but one would expect there to be at least some emotional impact. If the founder dies suddenly then the strength of the relationships existing between the surviving family members can become important (Kissane, 1996).

Of further importance is not only having to deal with the loss of the individual in both the family and business sense but there may also have to be the necessity to face the potential loss of the family business and all the benefits, social and economic, which attach to it.. As Shepherd (2009) demonstrated the loss of a business can be bad enough but combined with the loss of a loved one the results could well be very different. According to Patterson (2002) "[t]hese normative [unexpected, traumatic events] sources of stress have a way of pushing a family to the extremes of functioning either their functioning becomes much worse or much stronger (p.239). Danes et al (1999, p203) argues that when family business experience life cycle transitions or major ongoing stressful events, the members must create new patterns of inclusion, control, and integration. This is while having to deal with the immediate consequences of the sudden death of the founder (administrative -funeral arrangements, reading of the will – and emotional) and the potential loss of the family business.

Data and methods

As the argument depends upon the dynamics that take place in both a family and their business, then a methodology needs to be used that will reveal the richness of the how and why issues of the sudden unexpected death of the founder impacts upon the family business. An inductive case study approached was used for the process of data collection and analysis. This is necessary in order to examine the how and why of the case from as representative a number of perspectives as possible. For these reasons the research was based on a single case study. Using a single case study can be an appropriate method (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Single in depth case studies are not unusual in the literature (see Steen and Welch 2006; Siggelkow 2001; Martin et al 1998; Karra et al 2006). As Nordqvist, Hall and Melin (2009) and Habbershon (2006) point out there is a need for this type of research particularly in family businesses in order to reveal the richness of relationships that can exist in such contexts. A single case study acknowledges that the interrelationships between families and businesses can be unique (Sharma, Chrisman and Chua 1997; Kellermans et al 2008; Lubatkin et al 2007). This does not mean that what has been learnt from one family business cannot be applied in other family business contexts. As Zahra (2007), Jack and Anderson (2002), Habbershon (2006), Salvato, (2004) and Zahra and Covin (1995) point out context is important and context can impact upon actions and actions which take place in one context can be learned from and used in other contexts.

Case studies differ from other qualitative approaches in that they are most often rooted in existing theory and triangulation of data sources can include archival documents and interviews in an endeavour to provide reliability and validity to the findings. The extended case method (Burawoy, 1991) was used as a guide to data analysis. As Danneels (2002) point out, this methodological approach uses empirical data gathered through a case study to reconceptualize and extend theory.

The case selected attempts to understand how and why a family business survived the emotional and administrative weight of a sudden, unexpected, death of its founder. There was a lack of business knowledge and skills of the second generation due to the relatively recent formation of the firm. The ages and experience of the second generation was important. The lack of any formal succession process and the failure of the founder to share critical strategic details of the business with his children added to an already stressful situation. As the eldest daughter stated in an interview on the 25 September 2007 (the father died in November 2005), the children knew nothing about the financial side of the business, the general manager resigned six months after the death of their father, they were unaware the central business was losing money and these losses were being made up from the father's savings and other businesses. As the CEO to succeed her father she "didn't have [her] head round the position we were in" and spent months sorting it out. (Interview in Sydney Morning Herald, 25 September, 2007). Despite these factors (or perhaps because of them) the family business did not die with the death of the founder.

The case study used the death of the founder as the crisis point for the family and the business. Interviews of a representative group of key participants in the business were focused on events both prior and subsequent to the founder's sudden death. By adopting such an approach it becomes possible to construct a temporal horizon which can assist in placing the death and the subsequent events into a context of before and after so that meaningful comparisons can be made and tentative reasons advanced as to why the founders death did not prove fatal to the family business.

The case selection process was serendipitous. As part of the STEP (Successful Transgenerational Entreprepreneurial Project) a number of transgenerational family businesses had been selected based simply on the main criterion that the business had to be transgenerational. Two companies were randomly selected that met this criterion. One company was a third generation real estate and building company (Bricks and Mortar Pty Ltd), which had been founded in 1965. The second case was a fourth generation wine production and sales company that had been founded in 1889 (Grapes and Wines Pty Ltd). It had been noted at the time of the initial research in 2008 that one of the fourth generation brothers (the current generation running the business) of Grapes and Wines had been killed in a motorcycle accident. The accident took place in November 2005. He was 60 at the time of his death and was the second eldest of four siblings. It was originally thought this event might have ramifications on the Grapes and Wines Pty Ltd current and future entrepreneurial activities.

The initial project had been about how families could maintain entrepreneurial processes across generations; the question of the impact of the accident on the family was included in the initial interviews as an issue of potential interest. It was only during the interview with one of the children of the deceased that I became aware the deceased as well as being a part of the family business that had been established in

1889 and serving on the board of directors, had purchased in his own right in 1999 a wine company that the family business had acquired in 1992 and which he had been managing on behalf of Grapes and Wine Pty Ltd. This provided a unique opportunity to explore the impact of the sudden unexpected death of a family firm founder on both a well established family company and a newly established one.

Summary profiles of both the company and those interviewed are in Appendix 1

Case data were obtained using both primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through semi structured interviews while secondary data (company records and media reports) were also used in order to add to construct validity of the emerging patterns through triangulation (Yin, 2003). The secondary data were comprised mainly of company history, company reports, speeches delivered by key organisational members while a number of different classes of media reports were consulted – for example industry publications, general news, or business publicatons. There were an initial total of five interviews collected in the original round of interviews in 2008, two of who were family members of the fourth generation and two professional non family members of the long established family business (Grapes and Wines Pty Ltd); while the remaining interview was with one of the three surviving children of the deceased. The interviews were all conducted over a period of three days. The collected data was subsequently coded using NVIVO 7.

Overall, the study was designed in such a way so as to be in accordance with the five criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity as outlined by Guba and Lincoln (1989).

Data analysis

The data was analysed using literature drawn from family business; and emotion and grief. As already noted, succession is a key issue for any family business (Morris et al 1997; Motwani et al 2006; Sharma et al 2003) and, as a consequence, there is a substantial literature on the role of succession in family business, and a number of surveys by professional firms have supported both the importance of succession planning and the lack of succession planning being carried out. (Mass Mutual, 2002, MGI 2006; Barclays 2009; PWC 2007) Other academic reviews of the succession issue have also pointed to the importance of succession with the advantages and disadvantages of succession processes that have been in accordance with theory and those that have not. One of the key findings has been not the lack of a successor, but the unwillingness of those being succeeded to 'give up' their often dominant role in the company which results in great friction within the company and can cause problems with successors and their families (Ibrahim et at 2001; Boswell, 1973).

There was certainly no succession processes in place with Peter Brown Winery or, if they were, they did not follow the recommended process.. Eliza Brown, eldest daughter noted

> *She had often joked with her father about what would happen if he dropped dead - but he brushed it off. She wanted to know how he would like the business to be run but the only advice forthcoming was that she should put together a board of trusted advisers. (Interview, September 2007)*

Since the death of her father she had become "…passionate about succession planning for family owned businesses" which would seem to confirm there were no processes in place when her father was killed. Further evidence pointing towards the unpreparedness of the family for the sudden death of her father was her distinct lack of knowledge about the business. Eliza, who became CEO, "knew nothing about the financial side of the business" and that the companies were losing money. Eliza recalled: "That scared me a bit because I didn't have my head around the position we were in" and she spent months with the family accountant sorting things out. (interview with Eliza Brown with the Sydney Morning Herald on 25 September 2007).

The question as to why there was no explicit succession plan may be found in the way Peter (the firm founder) himself was treated when he was growing up in his family; the family that owned Grapes and Wines Pty Ltd. "Peter was like my father, he didn't share anything with his kids about finances or how the ownership structures worked…I don't think he would have shared much about the All Saints [one of the companies] business finances, the planning or processes either. He would have shared with them the passion for wine and the status it gives you" (Interview with John Brown, 2008, Grapes and Wines Pty Ltd)

Peter Brown Vinery Pty Ltd had no succession plan so that when he was killed his family was suddenly plunged into a crisis of both a professional and personal nature. Compounding the professional issue was the lack of business experience of the three surviving children. None of them had been prepared to take over the company. Eliza, who assumed the CEO reins on the death of her father, was "just cruising along". She had done an advertising and business degree and worked in advertising agencies in Melbourne for five years prior to returning to the family business. She then worked with her father for three years until his death. Angela [second eldest daughter] recalled "But there was still a lot of knowledge dad hadn't handed over that we had to figure out. But I think our uncles were pretty good mentors." [the uncles she refers to are the current owners of Grapes and Wines Pty Ltd.].

Certainly seemed to have been a knowledge and experience gap. Even without the help of their uncles there would have been substantial hurdles to overcome. Combined with the emotional impact of the event on the survivors then there is the personal to deal with in conjunction with the professional.

There is no doubt in relation to the emotional impacts of such a traumatic event on the people closest to the event. Patterson (2002) argues that unexpected traumatic events "…have a way of pushing a family to the extremes of functioning – either their functioning becomes much worse or much stronger." (p.239). Kubitz et al (1989) points out that when a death occurs, there is not only the stress of coping with this but the reactions of people outside the family can add additional stress to family members. Stafford et al (1999) when discussing what happens to a family when it experiences what they call "life cycle transitions" the family members need to create new patterns of interaction. This focus is on how families deal with grief but families are also made up of individuals and how individuals cope with grief will then find expression in the family relationships. Shepherd (2009), when discussing how the grief of losing a family business impacts upon the individuals and the family, uses the terms emotional intelligence for individuals and emotional capability for the group level as a measure of how grief will be dealt with.

Danes et al (2008) uses similar ideas but uses the term "resilience capacity" which is a type of social capital than can be used against disruptions. Vandsburger and Biggerstaff (2004) claim that family resiliency is one of the keys that moderate distress and possible negative effects associated with economic pressures within social groupings. This draws attention to another aspect of the death of the parent. There is an emotional process to be dealt with. But there is a potential economic one to be dealt with as there is no guarantee that the economic affairs of the business are in a position to recover from the death of the parent. Both Danes et al (2009) and Vandsburger and Biggerstaff (2004) outline various characteristics that family's need to possess in order to survive and cope with the emotional issues that come with the death of a parent and family business founder. Family functional and structural integrity as well as social support from family and friends are a number of key elements that are needed in the case of sudden, unexpected death.

From this perspective, the survivors certainly seemed to have possessed the necessary resilience to help coping with individual and family grief. As individuals, the three surviving children all agreed that if taking over the business meant harming their existing personal relationships then they would sell the business. Personal relationships were more important than carrying on the family business.

> *But the three of us had made an agreement. We thought we all wanted to continue with it but we made an agreement that if it made our relationships tougher then we don't want to do it anymore because the three of us are pretty tight and close. We thought the business isn't worth continuing if it gets in front of our relationships. So that was the deal we made. (Angela Brown, interview, 2008).*

Eliza (the eldest) agreed:

> *"But a week after their father died, they made a pact: if the business became a problem and the three of them were not getting along, they'd sell it." (Interview with Sydney Morning Herald, 25 September 2007).*

Angela stated "I don't think we would have got through it all without being close."

There was, apparently, no jockeying for positions or power struggles. The surviving family members simply stepped into roles they felt comfortable doing.

Discussion

The surviving family members were faced with a situation that could have seen the business fail. No succession plan, no business training, a lack of knowledge about key aspects of the business (especially the finances) were all obstacles that had to be dealt with. As well the general manager resigned 6 months after the firm's owner was killed. Under these circumstances it would not have been surprising for the family business to fail (or if not fail enter a kind of moribund state identified by both Meyer and Zucker (1989); and Boswell, (1973)). Yet it appeared none of these things happened. The company continued (it suffered a 'hiccup' – Angela Brown's words) to prosper and grow. The question becomes why? Why did the death of the family head and founder of Peter Brown Vinery Pty Ltd not prove fatal to the firm? There seems to be a number of reasons both professional and personal, which managed to save the company.

First, they had the services of a quality financial manager well experienced in family business matters. While he would not have been a board member he would have attended board meetings and thus would possess the knowledge that the kids didn't.

Second they had access to mentors who had spent a lifetime in the wine business – their uncles from Grapes and Wines Pty Ltd. Having such experienced mentors available as well as being family members would have given their advice an added dimension. It is after all one of the key advantages of family – they help each other.

Third, while there was no defined or outlined succession plan or process, all the children had been involved in the business at different levels for varying degrees of time and gaining experience in different facets of the business (except the key financial and strategic issues). It was not as if they had no knowledge or experience of the business. Even though their social capital may have been less than that possessed by their father they would still have gained some which would at least have meant they were not totally cut off from their father's networks.

Finally, as both individuals and as part of larger grouping (families) they demonstrated all the characteristics necessary for emotional intelligence and emotional capability which has been termed resilience.

Conclusion

The case demonstrates how such a concept of 'familiness' can find expression during a very emotional and stressful time for family members – the sudden, and unexpected, death of a father, husband, brother and uncle who also happened to be the driving force behind the family business. The two, family and business, were interrelated to such an extent that it was the combination of factors in both the family context and the business context which meant that the family and its business survived and grew. The sudden and unexpected death of Peter Brown did not prove fatal for the business.

Profile of the interviewees

Grapes and Wines Pty Ltd (A wine company with local, national, and international markets)

The current generation running the business is the third generation of the family. There were four brothers of this generation:

John Graham Brown – born 1941

Peter Brown – Born 1945, killed in a motorcycle accident in 2005 and the key individual in the case study. At the time of his death was a director of Brown Brothers, as well as owing Peter Brown Family Vineyards as his own family company.

Ross Brown – Born 1948

Roger Brown – Born 1956, died from a form of cancer in 1990

The family of Peter Brown – All involved in Peter Brown Family Vineyards

Eliza, born 1973, Currently Director and CEO of Peter Brown Winery; prior to the death of her father, she had worked with him as the sales/marketing manager and replaced her father on the Board of Brown Brothers when her father was killed.

Angela, born 1976, Director and prior to the death of her father worked in brand management and export sales.

Nicholas, born 1980, Director and at the time of the death of his father was studying winemaking at University, graduating in 2006.

Profile of the companies

Grapes and Wines Pty Ltd was established in Victoria in 1889 and has continuously been in the family since that date. All four brothers work (or worked) in different capacities in the company. In 2008 it currently held about 3 per cent of the Australian wine market and was known for being innovative in grape varieties, establishing a grape 'nursery' to test new varieties; production methods (most notable introducing in 1975 the first stelvin caps to be used in the industry but failed to gain market acceptance so had to discontinue them) and other innovations in the growing, harvesting, production, and marketing of wine. The company makes good quality mid price wines across a number of different styles of wines.

Peter Brown Winery is the amalgamation of two wine making companies, All Saints Winery and St Leonards Winery. The two companies were purchased by Brown Brothers in 1992 and managed by Peter Brown until he purchased them in his own name in 1999. The company does not have as broad a range of wines as does Brown Brothers and is generally a smaller operation.

Peter Brown, at the time of his death, was in the unique position of being both a director of Brown Brothers and Director/CEO of Peter Brown Winery.

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